The Fourth Church Pulpit

REMARKS: A CELEBRATION HONORING BETTY C. RENEKER

November 2, 1995

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Street Chicago IL 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
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They are my/our saints: Bob Moore, Phil and Phoebe Anderson, Perry Lefevour, Vic Obenhaus, Jo Davis, Elsie McFadden.

So thank you, Chicago Theological Seminary.

I'm particularly pleased to be a part of these festivities, bringing together two people who in their commitments and service and absolute determination to bring the Christian faith into dynamic encounter with the realities of the world have left their stamp on this Institution and this City, and in a way, symbolize the historic mission and presence of the Chicago Theological Seminary ... Betty Reneker and Graham Taylor, whose names and ministries appropriately are remembered in the Graham Taylor Award. You hear and see Taylor's name a lot around Chicago Theological Society; I was glad for the opportunity to refresh my memory.

Graham Taylor came to Chicago from Hartford Seminary where he was a pioneer in a new academic discipline — Religious Sociology or the Sociology of Religion. Although on second thought, I'm sure Wydick Schroeder and Vic Obenhaus would have told us there is a difference between them. In any event, Taylor came to Chicago Theological Seminary to teach it, and it was Chicago Theological Seminary which first established a department exclusively to focus on the new discipline — Religious Sociology.

What a unique time and what a critically important gesture in the long history of Christianity's love/hate relationship with the world. McGiffert wrote that behind the movement and Taylor's involvement was "the long ethical thrust of Calvinism with its insistence that without religion communities fall apart."

McGiffert cites a resolution passed by the first council of Congregational Churches in 1867 which observed that "it was the grand peculiarity of our Puritan fathers that they applied the principles of the Gospel to elevate society, to regulate education, to civilize humanity, to purify law, to reform the Church and the State — in short to mold and redeem by its all- transforming energy everything that belongs to (humankind) in individual and social relations."

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Sociologists, the newspaper explained, study crime until they lose their horror of it and thereupon relax the moral fiber of society.

I suspected it all along — didn't you? Who could not love Graham Taylor and Chicago Theological Seminary?

An interesting footnote is that while one paper was attacking him, the editor of the *Daily News*, Victor Lawson, was giving Chicago Theological Seminary the money for his salary.
[See J. C. McGiffert, *No Ivory Tower,* Ch. IV]

Graham Taylor believed that "people of faith and the religious institutions could make a difference in transforming individuals and society."

How fitting that his name is attached to an award presented this evening to a woman who has believed that all her life and, in fact, continues to make a difference in the lives of countless individuals and also the life of the City.

You are here because you know her and love her as I do. Her particular involvement and contribution to this institution and to many others in the community are listed and will be detailed later. But hear the criteria for the Graham Taylor Award and see if they do not strike you as a succinct description of Betty Reneker.

- Commitment to transforming the environment.
- Commitment to transforming public policy.
- The uplifting of the lives of all people particularly the marginal among us.
- A willingness to take leadership in bringing people together from all sectors for the promotion of the common good.
- A practical application of her faith to work the promise and pathos of our society.

That sounds like Betty to me and one wishes that at this peculiar moment in history, when politicians line up to do obeisance to Pat Robertson and Ralph Reid and James Dobson — that they might have the opportunity to hear Betty Reneker talk about Graham Taylor's religion, or better yet, see her in action.

We all do — because there is so much action and energy. I know her theological roots are deep in the tradition of Congregationalism and Puritanism but I confess I have a hard time thinking of Betty as a Puritan.
One night not long ago Sue and I were her guests at a lovely event at the Museum of Science and Industry. (Betty ran that place once upon a time too.) It was a wonderful evening; as always she was at her most gracious, bringing interesting people together, facilitating conversation.

As the evening wore on and the dinner proceeded, it became apparent that our table — Betty's guests — was being ignored by the servers. No entre'e materialized; the salad did and lots of wine, but as people around us were finishing dessert it became apparent that something had gone wrong. Now, most of us at that point take these things altogether too personally and start to become officious and obnoxious. Not Betty. She discreetly spoke with a waiter and food materialized — belatedly but deliciously.

But, in the process it had become a late night, Saturday, I recall. Now a clergy nightmare, next to losing the manuscript, is to get caught out too late. So we were driving north on the Outer Drive; I had a tuxedo on; it was midnight, not a time to get arrested for speeding. Can you see the headline? "Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church busted after late night party on South Side."

So — as I have learned to do — I tucked in behind the big car ahead. But it kept going faster and faster — exceeding the speed limit. I kept the pace and finally it dawned on us it was Betty — roaring up the Drive, almost midnight - no Puritan, she!

At her wonderful home on the lake guests are sometimes, regularly in fact, invited to climb an enormous sand dune — before cocktails; something she does without breathing hard. It's a wonderfully Puritan ritual: cocktails — but not until you break a sweat!

I know of no one who is a more appropriate recipient of the Graham Taylor Award. Betty Reneker's commitments to her family, her Church, her Country, this Seminary are something of the heart of the life of faith — lived openly and honestly and energetically and lovingly.

Betty is what Jean Bethke-Elshtain calls a Public Citizen.

We are, of course, doing more this evening than honoring a distinguished citizen. We are, I think, engaging in an act of corporate hope, affirming our deepest conviction that this world — this Nation — this City — can be a better place, a more just and gentle and compassionate place; affirming our deepest conviction that the Creator intends it that way; and that there are more important measurements of a society's viability than the market place alone. In fact, gathering here for this purpose, in the context of our recent political revolution, could almost be a defiant and counter-culture and prophetic act.

In her important book, *Democracy on Trial*, Jean Bethke-Elshtain (another of those troublesome Chicago Sociologists!) asks:

> "Have we democratic citizens become more fearful than hopeful?" And then elaborates — "Let me remind you of a few of our most paralyzing collective fears: the next generation's life will not be better than that of previous generations; America's position in the world will falter; communities will continue to disintegrate; families will continue to collapse; the center simply will not hold. Fearful, we retreat, or participate in the politics of resentment — finding someone or some group to blame for all our ills ... If the great Roman republican citizen Cicero lamented that 'we have lost the *res publica*' — I bemoan the loss of something similar — the *public citizen.*"

And then professor Elshtain describes Betty Reneker:

> "I embrace, as an alternative a new social covenant in which we reach out once more to our fellow citizens from a stance of good will and work to defuse our discontent, so we might forge working alliances across various groups." [pp. 37-38]

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- To care for the children
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It's a precious vision. It is at the heart of the life of this institution, and at the center of the life of an extraordinary woman, and, I submit, at the core of a strong and only hope for the future.

> "He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
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Thank you, Betty Reneker, for showing us how to do just that.

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